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News Release



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Lodi wine-grape growers to help restore riverside habitat

Growers partner with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on Safe Harbor Agreement

A draft agreement that would provide landowners along the lower Mokelumne River in San Joaquin County, CA, with incentives to restore up to 3,500 acres of important riverside habitat has been released for public comment by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The draft Safe Harbor Agreement is intended to encourage private landowners to expand and rejuvenate the dense riparian forests of the lower Mokelumne River watershed, enhancing habitat for the endangered valley elderberry longhorn beetle and a host of other species from migratory birds to salmon. Such habitat was once found along rivers throughout California's Central Valley.

Under the draft agreement, landowners who sign on could protect and restore habitat on their land without fear of future regulatory burdens.

The Service is accepting comments from the public on this draft agreement until April 26, 2006. Comments may be submitted to Shannon_Holbrook@fws.gov.

The lower Mokelumne River Safe Harbor Agreement covers more than 20 miles of the lower Mokelumne River, from Interstate 5 through north Lodi to the base of Camanche Dam. Much of the land is planted in vineyards and is the heart of the Lodi Appellation viticulture area (<http://www.lodiwine.com/>), nationally recognized as a leader in sustainable agriculture.

"Local winegrape growers told us they wanted to voluntarily restore some of the lower Mokelumne River's riparian habitat," said Harry McQuillen, partnership coordinator in the Service's Sacramento Field Office. "The Safe Harbor Agreement encourages landowners to implement voluntary conservation efforts by assuring them that they will not be subject to increased property use restrictions as they restore the habitat and increase the number of threatened or endangered species on their property."

The Mokelumne River SHA grew out of discussions between the Service, the Lodi-Woodbridge Winegrape Commission, the East Bay Municipal Utility District (owner and operator of Camanche Dam), the California Association of Winegrape Growers, and individual landowners. The agreement will be between the Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Association of Resource Conservation Districts.

“This is a very valuable agreement that will allow stakeholders in the lower Mokelumne River Watershed to move forward on riparian restoration and enhancement,” said Kent Reeves, a wildlife biologist with East Bay Municipal Utility District who helped craft the agreement. “It only took 2 years to develop the SHA, but this is the result of over 8 years of cooperative work between the public and private landowners of the watershed.”

The banks of the lower Mokelumne are home to the valley elderberry longhorn beetle, a federally threatened species that is dependent on native elderberry bushes growing along the river. With the assurances provided by the Safe Harbor Agreement, landowners will be free to plant additional elderberry plants as part of their riparian habitat restoration projects, helping work toward delisting the beetle. The habitat restoration will benefit many other species that live along the river.

Lodi winegrape grower Brad Lange said he is encouraged by the draft agreement.

“My family has grown grapes along the Mokelumne for 30 years,” Lange said. “We love the land and we already are improving the riverside habitat. With the Safe Harbor Agreement in place we will be able to move ahead with even more extensive restoration efforts, confident that we will have the support and protection of the Endangered Species Act and the federal agencies.”

The lower Mokelumne River SHA will be a voluntary agreement; landowners are not obligated to sign it. However, if they do sign the agreement and undertake voluntary restoration activities, they will be protected from violating the ESA – that is, they will not be liable under the ESA if they accidentally kill or injure a species covered by the agreement during habitat restoration or while performing normal, routine agricultural practices.

At the end of the 10-year term, landowners will be allowed to return the habitat to its pre-agreement conditions without fear of additional regulatory burden, or they can renew for another 10 years.

“The Service knows that it cannot save endangered species by itself,” McQuillen said. “We want and need willing private landowners to be our partners. The Safe Harbor Agreement is one more way in which the Service makes it attractive for landowners to help protect species and habitats.”

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 Fish and Wildlife Management offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.